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~ Add Schools, Libraries ~ New WOW Shatters Record ~ Facebook Hackers Cup!

-* Try To Block Net Neutrality! *-
-* Ruling: 4th Amendment Protects Email *-
-* Call for An Online Privacy Bill of Rights! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard

"Saying it like it is!"

"-----"

Okay, so I really screwed up last week! Some of you may only have noticed one or two of my errors because I caught a couple before I updated our various source sites, but the rest of you got hit with all barrels blazing! I'll plead a case of having a "senior moment" along with a short bout of having a brain f**t. Regardless, these were careless errors that should have been caught. And I'll leave it at that. Thanks to my pal Peter in the UK for bringing the most glaring of errors to my attention!

So, I can't believe it's the end of the week again! This past week has flown by so fast, I may have some whiplash! Only a week before the holiday - wow! We have all of our shopping done - a small miracle in itself! There were a couple of more things that were seeking, but they're currently out of stock or we want to wait until after the holiday for it. Not a problem. Now it's just a matter of sorting gifts, wrapping them, and keeping them away from the dogs, and each other for a few more days!

This past week we've seen a lot of bitter cold here in the Northeast, but we were devoid of snow. A lot of the country wasn't so fortunate, and many states are buried in the white stuff right now. We were supposed to get a significant snow storm this weekend and into next week, but it will be moving further out to sea than was initially anticipated. So, what we'll likely see is a few flurries. I'm not complaining! Still, however, I'm going to make sure that I have a full can of gas for the snow blower, and test it out this weekend to make sure it's running well. You just never really know when we'll get a sudden storm here in this part of the country!

Good luck making your final preparations for your holiday celebrations! Be careful out on the roads, in the malls, and even online - 'tis the season for unscrupulous characters!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. First of all, let me apologize for the duplication in last week's column. It was my fault. Normally, if I'm going to be late with a column, I ask Dana to use the late one for the following week. This time I modified the column in a few places and re-sent it.

Well, now that that's out of the way, let's talk about this darned weather. It's been cold here in the northeast. The kind of cold we normally don't get until the middle of January or so. Of course, I can remember my grandmother waxing nostalgic about "always having snow for Thanksgiving" when she was a kid, so that serves as a reminder to me that things change. Change isn't always a bad thing; change isn't always a good thing. Change is just... change.

I mean, look at the way the computer world has changed in the past 50 or so years. Heck, look at the way it's changed in the past 20, or 10 or even 5 years. I can remember watching one television show or another where they mentioned people using the internet... it was a 'future' show of some sort, and kids were playing 'online games'. "How silly" I thought. I came up with a handful of reasons right off the bat that something like that could never come to be. First of all, the internet just wasn't set up to do something like that. It was basically for academics and the military. It wasn't a type of thing that most people could or would use. Then there was the issue of computer 'strength'. Computers just weren't fast enough, flexible enough. They didn't have enough memory or storage. The graphics, if you could display them, would take way too long for even the best video card of the day to render. There would never, I thought, be enough power or speed to do that. And forget about watching anything like a movie. A cartoon, maybe. But a movie? Nahhh. And even with all of that, I thought that, the way technology kept progressing, 'they' might just make those advances. Some brainiac at MIT or Stanford might figure out a way to beat those problems. But the one thing that I didn't think would ever be insurmountable was the need for bandwidth. Compression had taken us all the way to 56K bits but that was, of course, dependent on how good your phone line was, and line noise was still a major inconvenience. Sure, you could try to compress the data more, but you still had to compress/decompress it, and that takes CPU power and a big buffer. How much more could we really expect to squeeze out of the standard copper phone line?

Yeah, there were "T" lines (T-1, T-3.. remember those?), but they were expensive. Far too expensive for most of us to have installed just to play games or send emails. There was talk of fiber optics, even back then, but those strands of fibers were quite expensive, and there were problems with using light as well. So it looked to me like we were just going to be stuck with 56K for quite a while.

Then came cable modems. They had their own problems, and I hated the idea of paying the cable company any more than I had to already... but it was a possibility. Not one I was particularly happy about, but a possibility nonetheless.

No sooner had I decided that we were just going to have to deal with it as a fact of life than some Einstein figured out that there's a whole other piece of bandwidth that wasn't being used in copper telephone wire. And DSL was born. It wasn't as fast as 'cable' could be at its best, but cable then, as today, is rarely at its best. So the technology world showed me up again, and a lot of use had the opportunity to add DSL onto our phone bills. As soon as it was available in my area, I talked my boss into getting it for the company. That allowed me to 'test' it before I decided

if I wanted to spend my own money on it. There were a few glitches, but nothing insurmountable, and in general I thought it was very usable and worth the price.

That was between five and six megabits per second ago. What blew my mind as blazingly fast back then would now have me screaming in frustration at what I would no doubt now consider a snail's pace.

So let's take a look back at how far we've come. Bandwidth that we could only have dreamed of back then, fast machines, much better graphics, a 'usable' internet (thanks to the guys at CERN for the WWW), and applications all over the place that allow us to do things we hadn't dared to dream of back then.

One can only wonder what awaits us five or ten years down the road.

On another note, I want to make my by now familiar pitch for the soup kitchens and shelters in your area. Get into the spirit and grab some stuff from the grocery store or even from your own cupboard and drop it off at anywhere that's having a food drive or at the shelter or soup kitchen. And yeah, I'm going to mention dragging the kids into it too. Show them that it's okay to give stuff away once in a while. Let them see that it's a good feeling; that it's the giving that's the good part, not getting credit for it. The simple act of helping someone else without worrying about credit or anyone seeing you do it can be amazingly satisfying. Try it and see.

Yeah, I know; times are tough for you too. You're just barely making it, and it doesn't look like it's going to get much better in the short term. But believe me, there are a lot of people out there that are a lot worse off than you and me. It's not as bad as the early 80's, but it's there. There are people out there who need just a little bit more help. Let's give it to them. You know what I mean... a couple of cans of soup, some dry pasta, cereal, heck, even baby diapers and bottles and things that we tend to take for granted.

And it's the 'things we take for granted' that can be the real 'gotcha'. There are needs that we take for granted every day... things that we just assume are going to be there... and usually are. Things that we just never pay any mind to until they're gone. For that reason, please also consider donating a couple of bucks along with the canned and dry goods. It doesn't have to be a lot of money. Even just a couple of bucks, added to everyone else's couple of bucks, can make a big difference. Yes, I know, things are tight. but there's a big difference between yours and my kind of 'tight' and theirs. Sometimes ya just gotta do it, ya know? Think about it.

And the last thing I want to mention to you is that this is the time of year that combines partying and occasional bad driving conditions. One of them you can't do anything about, but the other you can... please don't drink and drive. Like I usually tell you around this time of year: The life you save may be MINE. [Grin]

Well, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - World of Warcraft: Cataclysm Shatters!

Super Mario Bros. Turns 25!
Xbox 360 Most Used Console!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

World of Warcraft: Cataclysm Shatters Gaming Record

Less than one month. That's how long it took for the video-game industry to see yet another blockbuster title.

In November, Call of Duty: Black Ops shattered theatrical box office, book and video-game sales records for a five-day worldwide sell-through of more than \$650 million. Now World of Warcraft: Cataclysm looks like it might repeat the performance.

Blizzard Entertainment, maker of the popular World of Warcraft series, announced that Cataclysm - the third in the series of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game - sold more than 3.3 million copies during its first 24 hours on the market.

That qualifies Cataclysm as the fastest-selling PC game of all time. The previous record was 2.8 million-plus copies sold in 24 hours in November 2008. That was also a Blizzard title - and also a World of Warcraft title: Wrath of the Lich King.

"We had to bring Azeroth to the brink of destruction in Cataclysm, but the result was our best expansion yet," said Mike Morhaime, CEO and cofounder of Blizzard. Before the launch of Cataclysm, World of Warcraft's subscriber population had grown to more than 12 million players globally.

Michael Gartenberg, an analyst at Gartner, is seeing a strong season for video games across the board this holiday shopping season. He pointed to titles like Call of Duty: Black Ops and World of Warcraft: Cataclysm, as well as Microsoft's success selling its Kinect peripheral for Xbox and new Xbox 360s. But he also noted the growing popularity of nontraditional games.

"Angry Birds racked up five million paid downloads with \$1 million a month worth of advertising revenue, according to reports. So it's not just traditional game platforms, but also these new mobile gaming platforms that really didn't exist a few years ago, that show consumers are still very much interested in video games," Gartenberg said.

"Whether it's the hard-core user who is looking for a more traditional game experience or a casual mobile user, games are going to be very popular and we are going to see some impressive numbers this holiday shopping season," he added.

Like Microsoft with its Kinect launch, Blizzard put a flurry of marketing activity around the new title. World of Warcraft: Cataclysm was simultaneously released in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Europe, Russia, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand on Dec. 7, and became available in Korea and the regions of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau on Dec. 9.

More than 10,000 stores throughout the world opened their doors at midnight to serve players who wanted to be among the first to obtain a copy of the expansion. In addition, approximately 15,000 players attended official launch events hosted by Blizzard and key retail partners in the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Russia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, the U.K., and the region of Taiwan.

"World of Warcraft: Cataclysm delivered even bigger day-one sales than we experienced with StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty in July," said Bob McKenzie, senior vice president of merchandising at GameStop, "making this a record year for Blizzard Entertainment at GameStop."

Super Mario Bros. Turn 25 with 'All-Stars Limited Edition'

Mario and Luigi are practically senior citizens in the video game world. Now that they've hit the ripe old age of 25, Nintendo has released the "Super Mario All-Stars Limited Edition" package, a compilation of four Mario games and a soundtrack CD.

"Whether you've been a Mario fan for 25 years or are just now discovering his games, this limited-edition collection is packed with hours of fun," Mark Franklin, director of public relations for Nintendo in the U.S., said in a statement. "These classic games, along with the soundtrack CD and /Super Mario History/ booklet filled with rare concept art, make this a must-have collection for every video game fan."

The collection of games for the Wii is offered for \$29.99 "while supplies last," Nintendo said. The featured games included in the bundle are "Super Mario Bros.," "Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels," "Super Mario Bros. 2," and "Super Mario Bros. 3."

Nintendo said that it's the first time music from Mario games, which arguably have some of the most iconic sounds in gaming, have been available in North America. The CD features music from the very first edition of "Super Mario Bros" up to the most recently released Mario-themed game, "Super Mario Galaxy 2."

The history booklet that comes with the anniversary collection includes interviews and rare sketches, artwork, and photographs.

When it was first released in 1985, the original game sold more than 40 million units worldwide, and as technology has improved, Mario has remained a popular video game character. Fans of the game can visit the "Super Mario Bros. 25th anniversary site to commemorate the game's milestone birthday.

Xbox 360 Most Used Console, Wii Most Played Offline

Microsoft's Xbox 360 is the most used console among users aged 13 or older, according to a new survey from media tracker Nielsen. "Most used," meaning everything from playing games to watching movies or catching some tunes to surfing the internet.

The company used metered console tracking (similar to the "people meter" box the company employs to track TV and cable viewing habits) to gauge "electronically measured hours," which revealed users ages 13 and older spent 4.9 "total hours" a week with the Xbox 360, compared with 4.1 hours on the PlayStation 3 and 1.4 hours on the Wii.

Let's break that down. Males and females ages 13 and older spent 6.1 and 2.6 hours a week (respectively) using the Xbox 360, compared with 5.2 (males) and 2.1 (females) hours with Sony's PlayStation 3, or 1.7 (males) and 1.1 (females) hours with Nintendo's Wii.

Any surprises there? Perhaps. It's intriguing to see an apples-to-apples usage comparison for a change. Install base figures have no impact on these figures, since Nielsen's measuring equally sized populations.

That's only half the story, however. The company also breaks down use time on each console by function (though we're back to user-reported data here, as opposed to neutrally metered).

In share of console time among users ages 13 and older, 62% use the Xbox 360 to play video games, a figure that drops to just 49% for PlayStation 3 owners, but which soars to 69% for Wii owners.

How's that break down for online and offline games? 28% use the Xbox 360 to play online games, while just 19% use the PS3 for online gaming, and a mere 12% play online games with the Wii.

By contrast, 27% use the PS3 to watch DVD or Blu-ray movies, compared with 11% on the Xbox 360 (the Wii can't play DVD or Blu-ray movies).

Shift to streaming videos, however, and the Wii suddenly takes the lead with 20% of console use time, compared with just 10% of time spent with the Xbox 360 and 9% with the PS3.

Nielsen says it'll have more data to share in January 2011. I'll be paying attention. These are already some of the most intriguing (and legitimate) comparison metrics I've seen.

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Gawker Hack Spreads to Twitter

Registered users of Gawker Media websites are being advised to change their login information after e-mail addresses and password details for 200,000 users were released online after a weekend hack attack. What's more, the thefts may have contributed to a spam attack on Twitter, hijacking the sites of members who use the same logins for multiple sites.

Early on Monday, the head of Twitter's Trust and Safety team wrote that a spam attack appeared to be under way on its service. The spam advertises acai berries, a kind of diet aid.

"Got a Gawker acct that shares a PW w/your Twitter acct?," said Del Harvey in a Twitter message. "Change your Twitter PW. A current attack appears to be due to the Gawker compromise."

The websites affected include Lifehacker, Gizmodo, Gawker, Jezebel, io9, Jalopnik, Kotaku, Deadspin, and Fleshbot. Users are required to register, providing their e-mail address and a password, in order to leave comments on those websites.

A group named "Gnosis" claimed credit for the attack. The compromised information is now available in a 487 MB file, which can be downloaded from peer-to-peer networks using a torrent now indexed on The Pirate Bay. Other information in the file includes something called "gawker_redesign_beta.jpg" as well as Gawker's server kernel versions.

In the torrent release notes, Gnosis said "So, here we are again with a monster release of ownage and data droppage. Previous attacks against the target were mocked, so we came along and raised the bar a little."

The stored passwords were encrypted although Gnosis said some of the passwords have already been cracked.

"We're deeply embarrassed by this breach," Gawker said on its website. "We should not be in the position of relying on the goodwill of the hackers who identified the weakness in our systems."

Those who linked their Twitter accounts with Gawker do not have to worry about those passwords, Gawker said, while those who logged into Gawker sites using Facebook Connect are safe as Gawker does not store those passwords.

Gawker is recommending that anyone who has a registered account change their password. If someone uses the same password across other sites, those passwords should be changed as well, Gawker recommended.

"We are in the process of notifying those users who associated an e-mail address with their Gawker accounts," the company said, adding that it will create a feature by which users can delete their account entirely.

Yahoo Preparing To Lay Off 600 to 700 Workers

Yahoo Inc.'s holiday trimmings will include 600 to 700 layoffs in the Internet company's latest shake-up triggered by lackluster growth.

Employees could be notified of the job cuts as early as Tuesday, according to a person familiar with Yahoo's plans. The person asked for anonymity because Yahoo hadn't made a formal announcement.

The planned cutbacks represent about 5 percent of Yahoo's work force of 14,100 employees. It will mark Yahoo's fourth mass layoff in the past three years.

The latest two housecleanings have come under the company's current CEO, Carol Bartz, a Silicon Valley veteran hired nearly two years, despite a lack of experience on the Web or in advertising - Yahoo's main source of revenue.

This week's round of reductions is expected to be concentrated in Yahoo's U.S. products group, which already has been undergoing an overhaul since Bartz hired former Microsoft Corp. executive Blake Irving to run the division last spring.

The job cuts won't come as a shock. News of the looming layoffs was first reported last month by two popular technology blogs, TechCrunch and All Things Digital.

Yahoo's feeble financial growth, stagnant stock price and recent management defections have raised questions about whether Bartz herself might be shown the door before her contract expires in January 2013.

The company's revenue had edged up by less than 2 percent to \$4.8 billion through the first nine months of the year, reflecting the difficulty Yahoo has had selling ads while other Internet companies such as Google Inc. and Facebook are thriving.

Google's revenue climbed 23 percent to nearly \$21 billion through the first nine months of the year. Privately held Facebook doesn't disclose its results but it is growing so fast that it had to move into larger headquarters earlier this year.

The malaise has spurred speculation that opportunistic buyout firms might put together a takeover bid for Yahoo, possibly in partnership with another embattled Internet icon, AOL Inc.

Bartz, 62, has repeatedly insisted Yahoo, which is based in Sunnyvale, is heading in the right direction, although she has cautioned it might be another year or two before there's a significant improvement in the company's financial results.

Besides Job Cuts, Yahoo Will Shut Down Web Sites

After mass layoffs earlier this week, Yahoo is taking its cost-cutting knives to another area of the company. Yahoo is reportedly shutting down Delicious, Yahoo Buzz, MyBlogLog and Alta Vista. So far, the only confirmed closure is Yahoo Buzz.

"Part of our organizational streamlining involves cutting our investment in underperforming or off-strategy products to put better focus on our core strengths and fund new innovation in the next year and beyond," the company told All Things Digital on Thursday.

"We continuously evaluate and prioritize our portfolio of products and services, and do plan to shut down some products in the coming months such as Yahoo! Buzz, our Traffic APIs, and others," Yahoo said. "We will communicate specific plans when appropriate."

"Yahoo is trying to rationalize and streamline its product lines, especially after cutting heads this week," said Greg Sterling, principal analyst at Sterling Market Intelligence. "People are most upset about the possibility that Delicious will be shuttered."

To others, Sterling continued, all the changes seem to be further evidence of Yahoo's decline or shrinking nature. As for the future of Yahoo, Sterling said the Internet world will have to wait to see what happens.

"Levinshon and Irving are smart people," Sterling said. "However, the negative impact on morale has got to be significant. It's the latest in a series of cuts and reorgs that have taken place over the past two years."

Earlier this week, Yahoo cut 600 employees, about four percent of its workforce. Yahoo employs about 14,000 workers in Sunnyvale, Calif. Perhaps ironically, CEO Carol Bartz insisted Yahoo was still "hiring every day" as recently as mid-November. Most of the job cuts are expected to come from the product division.

Yahoo has been struggling for years. Enderle said Yahoo is still trying to recover from shunning Microsoft's acquisition offer in 2008. The software giant offered \$44.6 billion to acquire Yahoo, a 62 percent premium over Yahoo's stock at the time. But Yahoo snubbed Microsoft repeatedly, even fighting off a hostile takeover.

In October, rumors swirled that AOL and several equity firms might buy the Internet giant. Silver Lake Partners and Blackstone Group LP are among the firms that reportedly explored teaming with AOL to buy Yahoo, or even taking it private.

Fourth Amendment Protects E-Mail, Appeals Court Rules

Call it a landmark decision. In an appeal of U.S. vs Warshak in the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, the judges have ruled that the government needs a search warrant before it can covertly seize and search e-mails stored by e-mail service providers.

In the controversial case that could have widespread implications, the court decided that e-mail users have the same reasonable expectation of privacy in their stored e-mail as they do in their phone calls and postal mail.

"Given the fundamental similarities between e-mail and traditional forms of communication [like postal mail and telephone calls], it would defy common sense to afford e-mails lesser Fourth Amendment protection ..." the court wrote. "It follows that e-mail requires strong protection under the Fourth Amendment; otherwise the Fourth Amendment would prove an ineffective guardian of private communication, an essential purpose it has long been recognized to serve."

"[T]he police may not storm the post office and intercept a letter, and they are likewise forbidden from using the phone system to make a clandestine recording of a telephone call - unless they get a warrant, that is," the ruling said. "It only stands to reason that, if government agents compel an ISP to surrender the contents of a subscriber's e-mails, those agents have thereby conducted a Fourth Amendment search, which necessitates compliance with the warrant requirement."

According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the decision is the only federal appellate decision that squarely rules on e-mail privacy. The EFF said the issue is made all the more important by the fact that current federal law - in particular, the Stored Communications Act - allows the government to secretly obtain e-mails without a warrant in many situations.

"We hope that this ruling will spur Congress to update that law as EFF and its partners in the Digital Due Process coalition have urged, so that when the government secretly demands someone's e-mail without probable cause, the e-mail provider can confidently say: 'Come back with a warrant,'" said Kevin Bankston, a senior staff attorney at EFF.

Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, called the ruling a good and important decision. As he sees it, the ruling helps answer a critical question in the world of e-mail - which is whether there is Fourth Amendment protection for e-mail beyond what a federal statute provides.

"The Sixth Circuit has found that, yes, there is constitutional protection for stored e-mail communication, which is sensible, of course, because people do have an expectation of privacy of confidential messages, whether transmitted through a wire or through an envelope," Rotenberg said.

He doesn't expect the government to appeal the decision, but he also doubts these types of issues will go away because constant evolution of messaging networks and new technologies will pose new legal challenges.

"I do think we should be guided by the Constitution," Rotenberg said. "The Constitution adapts to new practices. If we are sending personal messages by e-mail as opposed to the Pony Express, we should still have constitutional safeguards."

New Report Calls for Online Privacy Bill of Rights

The Commerce Department is calling for the creation of a "privacy bill of rights" for Internet users to set ground rules for companies that collect consumer data online and use that information for marketing and other purposes.

The proposal, outlined in a report Thursday, is intended to address growing unease about the vast amounts of personal information that companies are scooping up on the Internet - from Web browsing habits to smart phone locations to Facebook preferences. That data is often mined to target advertising.

The new report is intended to guide lawmakers, industry and a White

House group looking at the issues surrounding Internet privacy.

It comes two weeks after the Federal Trade Commission recommended the creation of a "Do Not Track" tool to let consumers stop or restrict advertisers from studying their online activity - including the websites they visit, the links they click, their Internet searches and their online purchases - in order to target ads.

The Commerce Department report proposes the creation of a broad framework for industry behavior to ensure that companies give consumers clear notice about what personal data they are collecting and exactly how they are using it.

It would require companies to give consumers the opportunity to "opt out" of, or decline, some or all of that data collection and to correct errors in the information. And it would set clearer limits on the use of this information and require companies to secure the data they gather.

These so-called "fair information principles" would require congressional action to become binding. At least one key lawmaker, Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John D. Rockefeller, D-W.Va., said Thursday that he supports such legislation.

The Commerce Department report also envisions specific codes of conduct for particular types of companies, such as social network sites; services that deliver location-based pitches to mobile devices; and Web publishers and marketers that target ads based on a consumer's online behavior.

Those codes of conduct would be voluntary, but enforceable. The FTC could take actions against companies that commit to abide by them and then don't comply.

In what could become one of the more controversial elements of the Commerce Department proposal, the codes would be developed by Internet advertising networks, Web publishers and marketers, social networking sites and other online services, as well as government officials, consumer groups, privacy watchdogs and others concerned about Internet privacy.

The report recommends the formation of a federal privacy office inside the Commerce Department to bring these stakeholders together to hammer out the new codes of conduct.

While the proposal to create such an office signals that the Obama administration is elevating the importance of Internet privacy, the decision to place it inside Commerce has alarmed some privacy watchdogs.

They complain that the department is more concerned about protecting corporate interests, than consumer needs - as evidenced by its willingness to let the industry help write the new rules.

"Having the Commerce Department play a role in protecting privacy will enable the data collection foxes to run the consumer privacy henhouse," said Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a privacy group.

Meanwhile, the Interactive Advertising Bureau, which represents the online advertising business, praised the new Commerce Department report for recognizing the importance of including the industry in developing

rules to safeguard consumer privacy online. IAB added that the report validates the industry's own efforts at self-regulation.

The report, which has been approved by the White House, is intended to guide Internet companies and marketers as well as lawmakers and policy makers as they develop a new framework to safeguard consumer privacy on the Internet without stifling Internet commerce.

It also will inform the work of a subcommittee on privacy and Internet policy that was created inside the White House's National Science and Technology Council in October and shares the same goal.

"Consumers must trust the Internet in order for businesses to succeed online," Commerce Secretary Gary Locke said in a statement.

Commerce officials hope their report will also lay the groundwork for discussions with foreign governments to align global standards for acceptable industry behavior. The European Union, for one, has said it plans to update its privacy regulations to give consumers more control over their online data.

The Commerce Department report does not take a position on the FTC's Do Not Track proposal, which is at the center of a debate over how to give consumers more control over their online information. The tool would most likely take the form of a browser setting that would let consumers signal to websites that they do not want to be tracked or want only limited tracking.

Although privacy watchdogs have welcomed the FTC proposal, the online advertising industry has warned that allowing consumers to turn off all online tracking could have unintended consequences because tracking is used to deliver all sorts of personalized Web content - from sports scores to stock prices - and not just Internet ads.

Other recommendations in the Commerce Department report include establishing national standards on data breaches that would require companies to notify consumers in the event of a breach. Most states already have such laws, but those laws are often inconsistent.

The report also called for a review of the Electronic Communications Privacy Act, a 1986 law that extended wiretapping restrictions to e-mail messages and other data files, but is now considered out of date.

Hutchison Again Tries To Block Net Neutrality

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.), along with several Republicans, filed an amendment to the omnibus appropriations bill making its way through the Senate to bar the Federal Communications Commission from enforcing network neutrality.

Sen. Hutchison, the ranking member on the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, co-sponsored the amendment to H.R. 3082 with Senators Tom Coburn (Okla.), John Cornyn (R-Texas), Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), John Ensign (R-Nev.), Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.), John Thune (R-S.D.), and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.).

The House of Representatives already passed the bill, 212-206, on Dec.

8. It must pass through the Senate, then be signed by President Obama into law. The bill includes a controversial two-year pay freeze for some federal employees that has angered lawmakers on both sides.

"None of the funds appropriated by this Act may be used by the Federal Communications Commission to adopt or implement, or otherwise bring or litigate (1) any claim or otherwise intervene in, join, participate, or support any claim in any Federal or State court relating to any open Internet-based rules, protocols, or standards; or (2) rules, protocols, or standards regulating the behavior of broadband Internet access service providers with respect to discrimination of broadband traffic, network management practices, managed services, specialized services, or paid prioritization," the amendment states.

In a statement, Sen. Hutchison said that the FCC's network neutrality plan should be blocked. "The FCC chairman's attempt to impose new government regulations on the Internet is unnecessary government overreach that will stifle future innovation," she said in a statement.

Hutchison's amendment isn't the first time that the senator has tried to block the FCC's attempts to enforce network neutrality. In Sept. 2009, Hutchison filed an amendment to another appropriations bill that would bar the FCC from spending money on crafting and implementing regulatory changes.

On Dec. 1, the Federal Communications Commission confirmed that it will vote on a net neutrality proposal at its December 21 meeting. FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski provided an outline of the plan on which commissioners will vote, which is similar to the one proposed in October 2009, but does not reclassify broadband as a telecom service.

The plan outlined by Genachowski includes five basic points: meaningful transparency; a ban on blocking lawful apps and services; a ban on unreasonable network management; an allowance for a certain amount of ISP network management; and rules governing wireless that calls for transparency and a basic no-blocking rule.

None of these proposals are all that different from the original plan Genachowski proposed in October 2009.

Lawmakers Want Net Neutrality for Schools, Libraries

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission should expand network neutrality rules to providers of broadband service to schools, libraries and other community institutions when it votes on new regulations next week, three Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives said.

Representatives Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Doris Matsui and Anna Eshoo, both of California, sent a letter to the FCC on Friday, saying it's "critically important" that schools, colleges and libraries are protected by net neutrality rules.

Their letter comes after the American Library Association, the Association of Research Libraries and Educause raised concerns earlier this week that net neutrality rules proposed by FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski would apply to providers of residential broadband services and not to so-called community anchor institutions.

"Leaving these critical institutions out of the proposal will create a gaping hole in the FCC's net neutrality safeguards," said the letter. "Many community anchor institutions purchase standard access to the public Internet from broadband Internet service providers and simply cannot and do not negotiate their own terms or conditions unlike large corporations ..."

In many communities, libraries are the only place for residents to get free Internet access, the letter added.

The FCC is scheduled to vote on Genachowski's proposal on Tuesday. Matsui, Eshoo and Markey said they applaud the FCC's decision to move forward with net neutrality rules.

Several other lawmakers have blasted Genachowski for pushing the rules forward, however.

Genachowski's proposal is in "direct contradiction" to testimony he made in March before a House committee, said Representative Mike Rogers, a Michigan Republican. Genachowski said then he was not in favor of regulating the Internet.

FCC officials have disputed that new net neutrality rules would amount to Internet regulation.

Genachowski has called for the FCC to act on formal rules after an April U.S. appeals court decision striking down the FCC's attempt to enforce informal net neutrality principles in a case involving Comcast's slowing of peer-to-peer traffic.

"The FCC is not a legislating body," Rogers wrote in a Thursday letter to Genachowski. "If this vote is successful, I intend to work with my colleagues to immediately move to enact a disapproval resolution ... as well as subpoena the commission to a hearing examining your reasoning for ignoring the D.C. Circuit Court."

Also this week, Senator John Ensign, a Nevada Republican, and 28 other GOP senators sent a letter to Genachowski urging the FCC to abandon the net neutrality rules.

"The Internet has flourished over the last 20 years because of, not despite, a lack of government control and involvement," the letter said. "If the commission does adopt your plan to impose new regulations on the Internet, the cost of that action will be measured in investments forgone, innovations stifled, and most importantly, jobs lost. With America's economy in such a fragile state, the last thing the government needs to do is burden the private sector with more ill-advised regulatory red tape."

Genachowski first proposed that the FCC reclassify broadband as a regulated, common-carrier service in order to get around the limits of the court order, but his latest proposal would create net neutrality rules without reclassification. Several longtime advocates for net neutrality rules have criticized that proposal, saying it doesn't provide strong protections for mobile broadband users and it contains several loopholes for broadband providers.

Old Catching Up to Young on US Internet

Older folks are closing ground on youngsters quick to leap on hot Internet trends such as social networking and online shopping, according to a Pew Research Center study.

While members of a Millennial Generation made up people ages 18 to 33 are still way ahead in areas such as using smartphones to connect online, their dominance is slipping in many Internet arenas, the US study concluded.

"Even in areas that are still dominated by Millennials, older generations are making notable gains," study authors said in their findings.

"Some of the areas that have seen the fastest rate of growth in recent years include older adults' participation in communication and entertainment activities online, especially in using social network sites such as Facebook."

Approximately half of "Younger Boomers" ages 46-55 used online social networks in May as compared to just 20 percent two years earlier, according to the study.

The fastest adoption of social networks took place with people 74 years of age or older, with use quadrupling in two years to 16 percent of the group, the study found.

Overall use of online social networks by US adults of all ages nearly doubled in two years to 61 percent, while 83 percent of Millennials are members of such Internet communities, according to the research.

While Millennials are still more prone to watch online video, other generations are adopting the habit.

About 55 percent of "Older Boomers" ages 56 to 64 have watched video online, as have one-in-five members of the "G.I. Generation" ages 74 and older.

Older Internet users were also taking increasingly to getting news online.

Millennials were more inclined to send text messages or play online games, while older folks were more likely to visit government websites or check financial information on the Internet.

Online activities that proved popular to Internet users of all ages included shopping, banking, email, searches, and rating products or services.

"Searching for health information, an activity that was once the primary domain of older adults is now the third most popular online activity for all internet users 18 and older," the study said.

The only online activity that had its popularity eroded was blogging, with people evidently opting to express themselves in forms such as Twitter messages and Facebook status updates, according to the research.

No TV for a week, the time-honored punishment for misbehaving children, has been enhanced. Now, parents are also withholding Internet access to punish their kids, further sign that the Web has become as important to families as television.

As the two mediums converge, parents are quickly coming to see TV and the Internet in similar ways and are seeking to limit their kids' access to both, according to a report out this week from researchers at the University of Southern California.

The survey from the USC Annenberg Center for the Digital Future found that two-thirds of parents say they restrict their kids' access to TV as punishment, a number that has barely budged over the past 10 years. But the percentage of parents who limit Internet access as a form of punishment has nearly doubled in the last decade.

Among parents surveyed this spring, 57 percent said they withheld Web access to punish their kids. That is up from 32 percent in 2000.

Michael Gilbert, a senior fellow at the center, said parents are starting to not see a big distinction between TV watching and Internet use. Even so, parents are still more comfortable with the amount of time kids spend on the Internet - 71 percent said it was "just about right" compared with just 51 percent for TV.

Earlier surveys by the center have shown that families are spending less time together than they used to, a decline that has coincided with the explosive growth of social networks in the past few years.

Now, parents are saying Internet access at home is also reducing the time their children spend with their friends face-to-face. Gilbert called this a worrisome trend, though noted that the number of parents to report this is still small - 11 percent in 2010 compared with 7 percent in 2000.

Of course, the Internet and social networks also make it easier to communicate and they help families stay in touch with loved ones.

"The answer is never about technology. It's always about parental responsibility," Gilbert said. But he noted that the explosive growth of digital technology has made it increasingly difficult for parents to monitor what their kids are doing.

The 2010 survey was conducted in April among about 2,000 Americans over the age of 12. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

Facebook Holds Inaugural "Hackers Cup"

Facebook is challenging software hotshots around the world to show their mettle in the online social networking king's first "Hackers Cup."

Facebook is taking its tradition of all-night "hackathons" to a higher level with an international coding competition promising top contenders cash, glory, and a free trip to the company's Northern California headquarters.

The contest consists of a set of online rounds that kick off in January and a final round in March held at Facebook's campus in the Silicon Valley city of Palo Alto.

Facebook will pay for the top 25 contestants in the online rounds to come to California for the final stage of the competition.

The first place finisher is promised 5,000 dollars and will no doubt catch the eye of recruiters at Facebook. Details about the contest can be found at a Hackers Cup page at Facebook.

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